Categorization of brand associations: An attitude functional approach

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Abstract

This is a concept paper. It focuses on the categorization of brand associations using attitude function theory. Brand associations are the perceptions and attitudes of consumers towards brands. Various types of brands (i.e. global, national, regional brands) have different set of associations which guide their brand success and brand knowledge. Brand associations are also key drivers of consumer-brand relationship. As brands perform various functions for consumers, the attitudes and perceptions towards them vary accordingly. Thus, the attitudes and perceptions towards brands, brand associations, can be categorized in accordance with the functions brands perform for consumers. Such brand associations' categories include various functions like knowledge, utilitarian, social-adjustive, value-expressive, ego-defensive as suggested by attitude function theory. In addition to that, the author's detailed inquiry of literature shows brands being culturally compatible as a function to perform with. The understanding of categorized brand associations would help marketers to guide and facilitate the consumer decision making process.

1. Introduction

Brands have become crucial components of consumers' day to day life (Kapferer, 2005). Based on consumers' day to day encounters, they generate perceptions (Romaniuk & Nicholls, 2006) about brands and they store that as cues in their minds with verbal, visual or contextual information (Gues, 2011). These cues also trigger mental process with cognitive or emotional effects in the minds of the consumers (Bhat & Reddy, 1998), which in turn generates associations for the brands.

Substantial research has shown that brand associations vary for different types of the brands. For example, global brands have perceptions of higher quality and considered to be more prestigious and of higher social status (Batra et al., 2000). Also, global brands are considered to be more appealing for publically visible goods as it has higher aspiration value (Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price 2008; Zhou & Belk, 2004). Simultaneously, regional brands have greater appeal to the household products or more utilitarian products (Batra et al., 2000; Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008; Zhou & Belk 2004). In contrast to global brands, they are perceived as less prestigious and of social status (Batra et al., 2000; Kapferer, 1992). Such differences of consumer perceptions and attitudes are prevalent across various types of brands namely global brands, multinational brands, national brands, regional brands, local brands, etc.

The mentioned consumer perceptions and attitudes are the brand associations which drive brand success and brand knowledge (Farquhar & Herr, 1993). It has a prominent role in consumer-brand relationship too as they reflect the attitude towards brand by the consumers (Aaker, 1990). In spite of greater importance of brand association construct, till now, no study has focused on distinguishing brand associations across various types of brands (i.e. Global, National and Regional brands). In addition to that, brands perform various functions for consumers and attitude towards the brands vary accordingly. These attitudes can be categorized according to the functions they perform for the consumers. For the very reason, the author's objective is to categorize the brand associations through the Attitude Function Theory (Katz, 1960; Smith et al., 1956). As consumer's attitudes towards various objects (i.e. brands) perform various functions which guide and facilitate their behavior (Eagly & Chaiken, 1998; Katz, 1960; Locander & Spivey, 1978; Smith et al., 1956), the categorical underpinnings of brand associations would help brand managers to understand consumer's contributing factors for buying decisions across different types of brands.

In the following sections of this concept paper the author will elaborate on various types of brands with their brand associations through detailed review of literature.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Types of brands

A much more obvious difficulty while understanding the phenomenon of brands is lack of specific and distinctive terminologies and common definitions. The terminology of "Global Brands", "International Brands", "Multinational Brands", "National Brands", "Regional Brands", "Local Brands" have been used significantly in the literature, however without sufficient definitions. Seemingly, it has been a discretionary of individual authors to use

definitions. Global brands are defined as "Brands that are marketed under the same name in multiple countries with similar and centrally coordinated marketing strategies" (Steenkamp et al., 2003, p. 37), which are very similar in nature to the international brands defined as "Brands that have globalized elements in the marketing strategy or mix" (Schuiling & Kapferer, 2004, p.98). Whitelock & Fastoso (2007) have analyzed more than 40 articles on the international branding for the definition of global brands starting from the year 1975 to 2005. Surprisingly, only 9 had properly defined global brands. Apart from the common definitions, there is an issue with distinctive terminologies too. Some authors consider regional brands as brands which operate within a cluster of countries (Cayla, & Eckhardt, 2007), whereas some refer as the cluster of states or a region within a country (Oliva & Paliaga, 2012). In addition to this, local brands have also been defined as the brands which are marketed in a country or a limited geographical region of a particular country (Wolfe, 1991). Even within local brands, some authors refer it as a country specific brand of an umbrella global brand (Kapferer, 2002) and some refer local brands which has local origin (Batra et. al, 2000).

As we saw in the above mentioned discussion, there are lack of specific and distinctive terminologies and common definitions for various types of brands. This piece of research would consider three types of brands namely global brands, national brands, regional brands which are more distinctive in nature, whose definitions are discussed in the following sections.

2.1.1 Defining global brands

In marketing literature, the majority of the definitions of global brands share common brand elements like brand image, brand positioning, brand character, etc. in relation to geographical reach. As we can observe the same, Chevron (1995) defined global brand which has got the same brand character or values across the world. Here, brand character signifies the brand element and worldwide spread showcases the geographical reach. Another set of definitions have contextualized it in relation to the marketing mix components. As mentioned by Schuiling and Kapferer (2004), global brands are the one who has got similar marketing mix strategies across markets. Wherein, practitioners and market research firms have defined it on the parameters like geographical reach and performance of the brand (ACNielsen, 2001; Interbrand, 2006). In relation to this research, the author would use global brand definition from both the perspective of academic and practitioners. If we understand the global brands from its nomenclature then geographical reach is the key component. Thus, definition of Kapferer (2005) and AcNielson (2001) would be most appropriate.

2.1.2 Defining national brands

Over a period of three decades, national brands have been studied as a manufacturer's brand in comparison to private label brands, local private label brands, generic brands, and store brands (Ashley, 1998; Baumann & Hamin, 2014; Corstjens & Lal, 2000; Rizkallah & Miller, 2015; Erdem et al., 2004; Liu & Wang, 2008; Shetty & Manoharan, 2012). Perhaps the better focal point to understand national brand is to look at the definition based on the geography. The American Marketing Association defines national brands mainly on the basis of the geographic distribution of the brand. It says,

> *"National brands are the brands which are marketed throughout national market and usually it has been advertised and owned by the manufacturer" (Bennett, 1995).*

Largely academic literature surrounding the national brands have followed the understanding of national brands in relation to geography only and no authors have explicitly defined it in their research contexts (Baltas, 1997; Bronnenberg, Dhar, & Dube, 2007; Cunningham et al., 1982; Kadirov, 2015; Steenkamp, Heerde, & Geyskens, 2010). In this paper, the author considers national brands as the brands which have distribution throughout national market and have been managed by the manufacturers only.

2.1.3 Defining regional brands

A search for the academic literature on regional brands in India has given the absence of relevant sources even though with the presence of the strong regional brands in the country. In India, regional brands, which are available in a single state or cluster of states within the country, give tough competition to their national and global counterparts with considerable market share. In the academic literature, no authors have explicitly defined regional brands and have not discussed the characteristics of the same too. In the context of the present study, regional brands refer to specific market or cluster of markets pertaining to a region within the country (Johonson & Bruwer, 2007; Lewis & Stubbs, 1999; Oliva & Paliaga, 2012) which has geographic proximity, economic perspective and socio-cultural proximity (Stöttinger & Penz, 2011).

In the following section, the author would elaborate on the brand associations for above mentioned three types of brands.

2.2 Brand associations

Brand associations are defined as the brand's assets and liabilities which are linked to the memory of the consumer (Aaker, 1991). They are also defined as "informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory and [they] contain the meaning of the brand for consumers" (Keller, 1998, p.93). Keller (1993) has linked various brand association to three characteristics named attributes, benefits and attitudes. The associations for various types of brands encompassing these three characteristics are discussed below.

2.2.1 Brand associations for global brands

Global brands look, feel and operate in the similar way across the globe (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 1999; Levitt, 1983) with the standardization of the product portfolio (Chernatony et al., 1995). Global brands comprise of larger geographic availability (AcNielsen, 2001; Interbrand, 2006) with similar marketing mix strategies in all markets (Schuiling & Kapferer, 2004). They are believed to be promoted with the similar brand name and centrally managed marketing activities (Steenkamp et al., 2003) to establish unified brand message across globe (Moore & Liz, 2007). Their positioning, personalities are same from one country to another (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 1999). Although, they have the same name and image across countries (Steenkamp, Batra, & Alden, 2003; Keegan & Green, 2004), Inkpen and Ramaswamy (2006) have pointed out that they customize messages too at the local markets while conveying the unanimous brand image all over.

Global brands have perceptions of higher quality and considered to be more prestigious and of higher social status than national and local brands (Batra et al., 2000; Dimofte, Johansson, & Ronkainen, 2008; Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price 2008). They are considered to be more appealing for publically visible goods as it has higher aspiration value (Batra et al., 2000;

Dimofte, Johansson, & Ronkainen, 2008; Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price 2008; Zhou & Belk, 2004). Globally, it reflects the same set of values (Chevron, 1995) like "status", "modernity", "cosmopolitan sophistication" and "technology proficiency" (Batra et al., 2000; Dimofte, Johansson, & Ronkainen 2008; Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price 2008).

2.2.2 Brand associations for national brands

National brands are rated high on overall quality and reliability than store brands and generic brands (Bellizzi et al., 1981; Cunningham et al., 1982; Hawes et al., 1982). For the food category brands, the aroma and taste of national brands have been better than store brands (Bellizzi et al., 1981; Cunningham et al., 1982; Hawes et al., 1982). They facilitate hedonic benefits with high level of product quality (Cunningham et al., 1982; Sethuraman, 2000). They also have an upper hand in terms of brand image over and above quality (Ailawadi, Neslin & Gedenk, 2001). They are more socially accepted than private labels are (Baltas, 1997). In addition to this, national brands are efficient in "product design", "operational process efficiency" and technology usage (Steiner, 2004). They are perceived to be more innovative than private labels (Steiner, 2004). They are also scaled high on consumers' positive attitudes, preferences, repurchase intention and brand loyalty (Breneiser & Allen, 2011).

2.2.3 Brand associations for regional brands

Regional brands refer to specific market or cluster of markets pertaining to a region within a country. They are produced, promoted and distributed in a specific region within a country with the tailored needs of the local markets (Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008; Van Gelder, 2003). Regional brands have greater appeal to the household products or more utilitarian products (Batra et al., 2000; Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008; Zhou & Belk 2004). In contrast to global brands, they are perceived as less prestigious and social status (Batra et al., 2000; Kapferer, 1992), perceived lower quality (Alden, Steenkamp, & Batra, 1999), close-minded (Steenkamp et al., 2003), and aged (Ozsomer, 2012). In contrast to such negative associations, they are also perceived as "unique", "original", "culturally representative", trustworthy, and "affect-laden" than global brands (Schuiling & Kapferer 2004; Swoboda, Pennemann, & Taube, 2012). Consumers do perceive them as emotionally appealing entities (Holt, 2004; Kapferer, 2002). Regional brands build strong associations with the local culture, national identity and heritage (Ger, 1999). Also, regional brands can benefit by being held through the perception of "local iconness" (Steenkamp, Batra, & Alden, 2003; Xie, Batra, & Peng, 2015).

As the author has noted, different types of brands significantly vary in their brand associations. These consumer attitudes and perceptions towards the brands perform different functions for the consumers. In the following section, the author would discuss the functional approach of attitudes which has been considered as a theoretical framework to the study.

2.3 Attitude function theory

Consumer's attitudes towards various objects perform various functions which guide and facilitate their behavior (Eagly & Chaiken, 1998; Katz, 1960; Locander & Spivey, 1978; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956). Smith et al. (1956) and Katz (1960) conceptualized a functional approach in order to understand the people's attitude and their functional orientations. Initially, Smith et al. (1956) introduced three attitude functions namely object appraisal, externalization

and social adjustment functions. Then, Katz (1960) introduced four attitude functions namely knowledge, utilitarian, value-expressive and ego-defensive functions. Among all these seven attitude functions, object-appraisal function resembles knowledge and utilitarian functions, wherein externalization resembles with ego-defensive function (Shavitt, 1990). So, five distinct attitude functions are explained herewith.

Knowledge function caters to the attitudes which are generated after summarizing, organizing and structuring large amount of information about an attitude object (Fazio, Powell, & Williams, 1989; Katz, 1960). Such attitudes help consumers to make decision quickly as they need not to visit initial information again on which they had formed their attitudes. Also, these attitudes provide consistence in consumer's frame of reference (Katz, 1960). Attitudes which serve *utilitarian or instrumental function* guide consumers to maximize rewards and minimize punishment from the objects in their surroundings (Herek, 1987; Katz, 1960). Attitudes serving to *value-expressive function* facilitate consumers to symbolize and express their central values, idiosyncratic preferences and self-concept to others (Katz, 1960; Shavitt, 1990). These attitudes help consumer in identifying like minded people whose central values are in synergy and they facilitate interpersonal communication with like mined people (Katz, 1960; Shavitt, 1990). Attitudes pertaining to *social-adjustive function* help consumers to identify with reference groups and confirm others' expectations within that group (Smith et al., 1956). These expectations match ensures smooth and efficient interactions within the group (Snyder & DeBono, 1989). Smith et al. (1956) also noted that these attitudes mediate self-other relationship and establish consumer's identity. Lastly, attitudes serving to *ego-defensive function* can serve as a defence mechanism to the consumers which would help them to cope up with internal conflicts (Katz, 1960). Smith et al. (1956) also call it the externalization function, wherein people use various defense mechanisms like denial, repression or projection in order to protect themselves from the threats of their internal and external environment (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

In order to generate a categorization of brand associations, the author has used attitude function theory as a base and considered above mentioned three types of brands as an attitude objects. After combining all the brand associations across various types of brands, the author presents categorization in the following section.

3. Analysis

Brands perform various functions for consumers and attitude towards the brands vary accordingly. These attitudes can be categorized according to the functions they perform for the consumers. For the very reason, the author categorizes the brand associations through the Attitude Function Theory (Katz, 1960; Smith et al., 1956).

3.1 Categories of brand associations

Attitudes relating to *knowledge functions* are based on the information set which consumers have through various data points or past experiences. Such information set generally relates to the information of brand's performance and its product attributes. Brand associations relating to product attributes include price-quality perceptions, quality perceptions, and efficient product

design. Whereas, a brand's performance related association include operational process efficiency and how efficiently brand is able to use technology.

Attitudes pertaining to *utilitarian or instrumental function* guide consumers to maximize rewards and minimize punishment from the usage of a particular brand. Like knowledge function, attitudes pertaining to utilitarian also relate with the brand's performance and product attributes. Brand associations like efficient product design, efficient geographical reach, operational process efficiency and product reliability belong to utilitarian function. In addition to that, associations related to sensuality which is typically connected with aroma or taste of the product also belongs to utilitarian function. Pricing of the brand is also related to the rewards and punishments for the consumers, which validate its belongingness to the utilitarian function. Consumer's level of product involvement also pertains to utilitarian function. Global brands have been perceived as high product involvement, wherein regional brands are perceived to be suitable for low involvement product.

Attitudes serving to *value-expressive* function facilitate consumers to express and symbolize their central values, idiosyncratic preferences and self-concept. Brand associations under this category include regional brands being unique, trustworthy, original, affect laden and emotionally appealing. Also, global brands are perceived as a reflection of modernity and cosmopolitan sophistication. Wherein, national brands have been perceived as innovative. Such reflections of central values of the consumers belong to value-expressive function.

Attitudes serving the *social-adjustive function* help consumers identify with reference groups and confirm others' expectations within that group. Also, they help consumers establish identity among others. Global brand are perceived to be prestigious and provide higher social acceptability, whereas regional brands are believed to be of lower status. Such perceptions belong to the category of social-adjustive function.

Attitudes pertaining to *ego-defensive function* can serve as a defense mechanism to the consumers, which would help them cope up with internal conflicts. Consumer may use defense mechanisms like denial, repression or projection to prove purchase decision a worth. Consumers do perceive that global brands have more power. Thus, sometimes although a consumer doesn't find a brand worth, he would equate the power of the brand as a defense mechanism for their purchase decision. Likewise, higher aspiration value for global brands would serve as an ego-defensive mechanism. Such attitudes protect consumers from internal conflicts of buying decision.

Herewith, the author presented categories of brand associations across different types of brands (i.e. Regional, National and Global) through attitude function theory. In the following sections, discussion, imitations and future research would be presented.

4. Discussion

In relation to brand associations, attitude functions provided by Smith et al. (1956) and Katz (1960) do not capture the whole phenomena. Consumers' attitudes towards regional brands significantly reflect its connection with the local culture which has not been captured by any of the function mentioned above. So, such connections need to be understood separately. Consumers consider regional brands for their set of choice when they perceive them to be

culturally representative (Schuiling & Kapferer, 2004). Regional brands have perceptions of "local iconness". It is defined as "The degree to which a brand symbolizes the values, needs, and aspirations of the members of the local country." (Ozsomer, 2012). In this conceptualization of local iconness, the main emphasis is on the brand's local associations and the cultural reference group a brand belongs to (Ozsomer, 2012). Thus, consumers would prefer a regional brand when they perceive that the brand is compatible with the local culture and represent the same with its symbolic value. So, a brand also performs the function of being compatible with local culture. The attitudes serving to this function would signify an attitude object's (i.e. brand's) ability to understand local culture, rituals to which an attitude object has been related. Brand associations related to this function may include local iconness, reflection of national identity, association with heritage and cultural representativeness of the brand. An absence of this function is reflected the knowledge gap into current context of attitude functions. Below mentioned is the graphical representation of the categorization of the brand associations.

Figure 1. Categorization of Brand Associations

Thus, the author has categorized brand associations of various types of brands using the attitude function theory.

5. Limitations, future research and implications

This piece of research is conceptual in nature based on the review of literature, so the results of this paper cannot be said to be conclusive. As a part of future research, more nuanced primary research will yield better outcomes which could be generalized. Initially, an exploratory study would help to identify brand associations across different types of brands which could be validated through empirical quantitative study to establish the brand associations' categories. Such categorized brand associations would also work as an input mechanism to establish more robust models between different constructs. For example, brand associations which are consumers' perceptions and attitudes towards brands are the antecedents of brand personality (Aaker, 1997). So, to establish a relationship between two latent constructs named brand association and brand personality, the mentioned categorization could help to generate more nuanced model to establish such relationship. Apart from that managers can use these categories as clues to understand consumers better and they can execute their brand positioning strategies accordingly.

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